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AIRGRAM

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HANDLING INDICATOR

TO : Department of State
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TAGS: GT, PINS, SHUM, PORS
FROM: Ambassador GUATEMALA

DATE: October 19, 1977

SUBJECT: Monthly Report on Political Violence and
Human Rights: September, 1977

REF

SUMMARY: Political violence, by the measure of press-reported incidents, fell sharply in September from the previous month's heavy toll. Seventeen incidents accounted for some 19 deaths. Those with heaviest impact on the public consciousness were the downtown Guatemala City riot during independence anniversary ceremonies and the gunning down of a former Defense Minister, probably by the increasingly active PGT/FAR. The EGP gave evidence of a continued presence in the Oriente. On the human rights side, ratification of the San José Convention moved a step closer, while the GOG endorsed the proposal to create a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. **END SUMMARY**

Imponderables in the Violence Equation Most of September's incidents were of the sort, common in this monthly series, which are difficult to categorize by motive or origin. That the victims in most cases appeared to be rural persons of ample means does not satisfy either of these questions. A mutilated body found in a river bed or on a roadside, after all, can be a manifestation of many things: economic interests desirous of intimidating would-be grass roots leaders; disputes over land ownership and water rights; the vengeance of terrorist cadre against deserters, defectors or informers; feuding within established political groups or unions, or among them; or simply a personal grudge carried, in a violence-prone society, to a sadistic conclusion. Further muddying the waters is the tendency of witnesses to keep silent for their own protection and the skill of assailants in avoiding recognition through the use of fake documentation or a misleading mode of dress. The lack of good information in most cases

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leaves little basis for conjecture about the extent to which there exists toleration, much less complicity, at some level of the government structure in a given incident.

What can be said with greater certainty is that isolated violent incidents in the countryside, although their aggregate may be impressive, have little impact on the public consciousness. Urban incidents, especially those with prominent victims, do.

Thus it is that despite the low number, at least by recent Guatemalan standards, of incidents of probable political violence recorded in September, the public perception is otherwise. Recognizing this, and conscious of the violence which has characterized election campaign periods in the past, President Langerud called together the principal Presidential candidates, and representatives of the political parties, to expect them to come up with mutually acceptable ground rules to limit the level of violence in the months leading to the March 1978 elections.

It is noteworthy that the visit of the Spanish monarch, and the international press attention it received, was not exploited by local terrorist groups. Heavy security may have played a part.

Two events in September contributed to the perception of ever-heightening violence: (1) the riot of obscure origin in downtown Guatemala City during the September 15 Independence anniversary celebration which now appears to have claimed the lives of two persons (Guatemala 5904); and (2) the assassination of retired Colonel Rafael Arriaga Bosque, former Defense Minister, and his bodyguard, apparently by elements of the PGT/FAR (Guatemala 6165). Indications continue that PGT/FAR groups are acting independently of the generally more cautious PGT Central Committee. The phenomenon is an ominous one.

The EGP issued a bulletin in September reporting the execution in Chiquimula Department of two EGP "deserters" by the First of May Guerrilla Front, which operates in the Oriente. Belatedly the EGP also took credit for an August ambush of a military patrol in the mountains near Olopa, in Chiquimula Department (see August report, A-106). The EGP version differed considerably from that given the DATT who had dismissed the

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incident as a run-in with bandits. Five soldiers died in the clash, according to the EGP. The bulletin also contends that the military later hanged their civilian guide in suspicion that he had led them into a trap. In the military version, the guide was the only fatality inflicted by the ambushers. Whatever the details, the bulletin appears to confirm that the EGP still has a presence in the mountains of eastern Guatemala.

Human Rights Atmospherics The Council of State gave its blessing to ratification of the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights, a preliminary to submission of the Convention to the Guatemalan Congress. As further profession of the government's dedication to human rights principles, Foreign Minister Adolfo Molina Orantes, in his September 30 address to the UNGA, expressed complete GOG support for the Costa Rican initiative to create the office of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The post "would be a suitable means for filling the current void which, with more enthusiasm than equanimity, some private groups, whose conclusions often flow from generalizations or unproven complaints, try to occupy." The allusion, presumably, was to Amnesty International and other human rights monitors which the government is wont to accuse of pro-communist axe grinding. Many here in the economic and political establishment applauded former Secretary Kissinger's New York University speech. They saw it as a warning to President Carter against sacrificing U.S. vital interests (read the traditional friendship of countries like Guatemala) to the human rights cause.

Statistics In terms of gross numbers, political violence, after an unusually active August, fell to more normal levels. By our measure of press-reported incidents, there were 17 for which we premise some political motive. These accounted for some 19 deaths. August's pattern of heavy incidence on the South Coast (nine such acts in September) and in rural areas was maintained. Guatemala City recorded only three incidents, although the two mentioned above had heavy public impact. The Oriente accounted for five; the Indian highlands, none.

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